

Quinn Chapel

Preliminary Summary of Information
March 7, 1977

Commission on Chicago
Historical and Architectural Landmarks

Quinn Chapel
2401 South Wabash
Chicago, Illinois

Date: 1891-92
Architect: Unknown

The Quinn Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church houses the oldest black congregation in the city of Chicago. The congregation's history dates back to 1844 when seven black Chicagoans organized a non-sectarian prayer group that met weekly at the home of one of its members. Soon they purchased a frame building located at LaSalle and Washington streets and moved it to a lot they purchased on the east side of Wells Street near Washington Street. In 1847, the prayer group organized as a congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church was named Quinn Chapel after Bishop William P. Quinn, the bishop of the A.M.E. diocese in 1847.

Quinn Chapel's first pastor was Thomas Farnsworth, who initiated a program to purchase another lot and erect a permanent church building. The first payment on the lot chosen for the building at the corner of Jackson and Federal streets (now the site of the Monadnock Building), was made in 1848. Quinn's congregation had more than fifty members at the time, many of whom were ex-slaves who had either purchased or been given their freedom or had escaped from slavery in the south. Quinn played an active role in the abolition movement in Chicago. This role was intensified in 1850 when Congress passed a more stringent fugitive slave law as part of the Compromise of 1850. This law denied the fugitive slave a jury trial or the right to testify in his own behalf. It provided for heavy fines and jail sentences to anyone who aided a fugitive slave anywhere in the country. Shortly after the fugitive slave law was passed, Quinn's congregation held a special meeting at which they resolved that: "We who have tasted freedom are ready to exclaim with Patrick Henry 'Give us liberty or give us death', and 'Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.' We will stand by our liberty at the expense of our lives, and will not consent to be taken into slavery or permit our brethren to be taken."

Quinn's congregation built their church on the lot at Jackson and Federal streets in 1853. This church was used as a station on the underground railroad. The underground railroad was a network of homes and other buildings ("stations") owned by abolitionists in both the North and the South that were used to house and give aid to fugitive slaves on their flight to freedom in Canada. Since the enactment of the fugitive slave law in 1850, runaway slaves were no longer safe from capture in any of the northern U.S. cities. The church was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871.

Between 1871 and 1876, Quinn Chapel had several temporary locations. In 1876 a new church structure was built for Quinn Chapel on Federal Street just south of Van Buren. The congregation used this church until 1891 when it sold the building to finance the construction of the present Quinn Chapel at the corner of Twenty-fourth Street and Wabash Avenue.

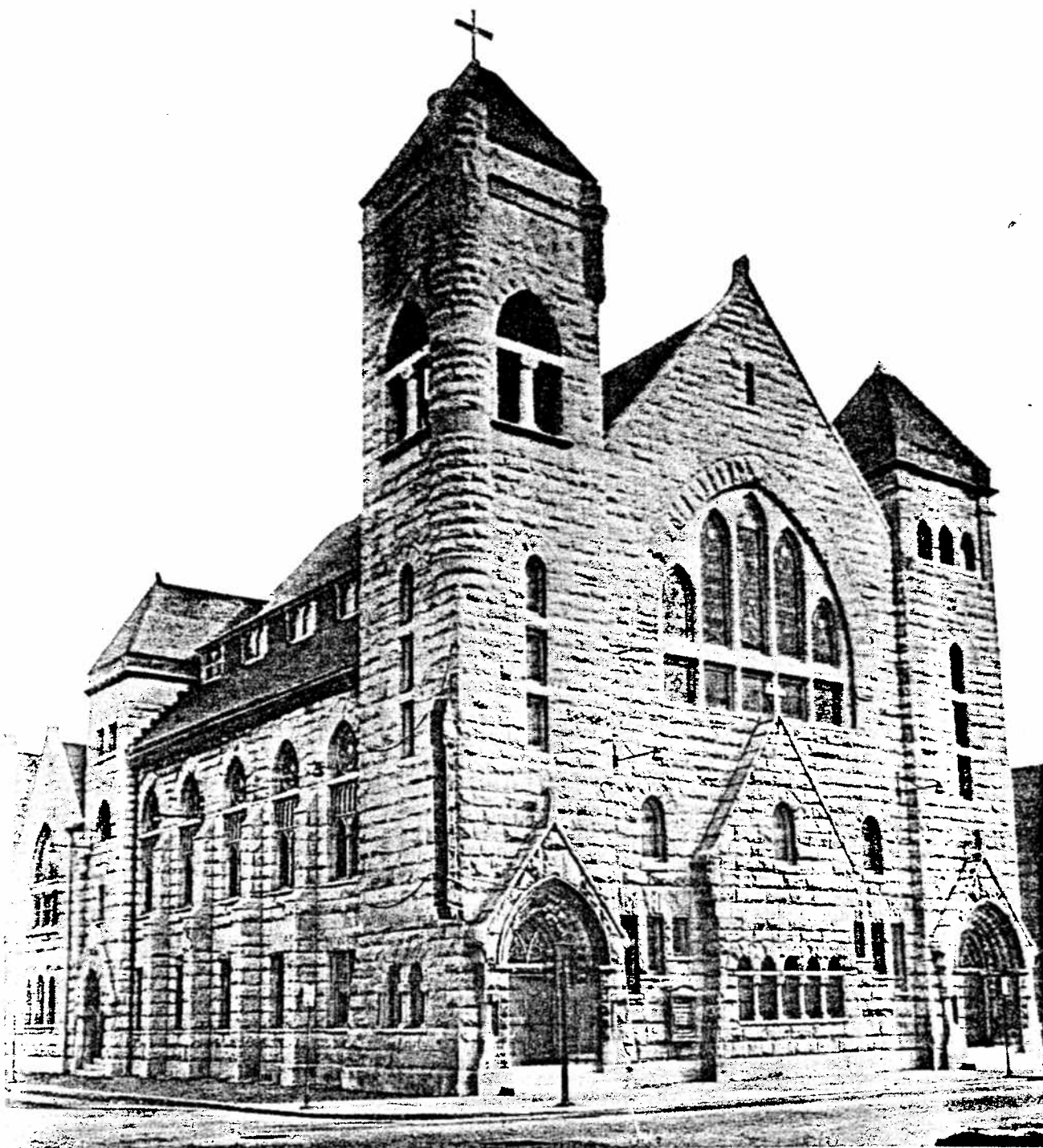
Quinn Chapel is a well-maintained brick and rusticated gray-stone building that faces west, fronting on Wabash Avenue. A tower projects on either side of the facade. A gabled porch leading to an arched entranceway projects from the front of each tower. The tower at the northwest corner of the church houses the belfry which has four arched openings, each divided by a stone spandrel supported by a columned mullion. The roof of the tower is topped by a simple metal cross. The tower at the southwest corner of the church is shorter than the other and has three arched openings carved into both its west and south sides just below its roof.

Between the towers is a gabled projection with five colonnaded windows with a single arched window above. Above this projection are fine lancet windows arranged within an equilateral stone arch. There is a narrow rectangular opening carved into the facade above the center of the arch just below the peak of the building's gable roof.

The north side of the building faces Twenty-fourth Street and is of rusticated graystone. A slightly projecting bay at the eastern corner balances the tower at the western corner. The bay features a gabled porch leading to an arched entranceway, similar to the two on the building's front. Between the bay and the tower are four stone buttresses that separate five rectangular windows at the base of the building, each with a tall stained-glass lancet window above. The roof is punctuated by a series of five dormer windows.

Much of the interior of the structure is original. The first floor houses the Sunday school and offices. The second floor houses the chapel. The floor of the chapel is wood; the original wooden pews are divided by two aisles and are slightly rounded so as to face the sanctuary, which features an organ that was an exhibition piece at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. Behind the organ on the back wall of the sanctuary is a mural that depicts Christ's Resurrection; it was painted in 1904 by Proctor Chisholm, a congregation member. A balcony with wooden pews extends along both sides and the rear of the chapel. The upper portion of the chapel's walls and its vaulted ceiling are sheathed in painted sheets of pressed metal.

As the oldest black congregation in the City of Chicago, Quinn Chapel has contributed much toward the social, economic, and cultural development of Chicago. Such institutions as the Bethel A.M.E. Church, Provident Hospital, the Elam Home, and the Wabash Avenue Y.M.C.A., were founded and nurtured by the members of the congregation of Quinn Chapel. Throughout its history, members of Quinn Chapel have served Chicago as members of both houses of the state legislature and have distinguished themselves and Chicago by their service in every war since the Civil War. Quinn Chapel today continues to exert a vital and stabilizing influence on the Near South Side community where it is located and on the entire city of Chicago.



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